THE SOCIAL PLANNING and RESEARCH COUNCIL of Hamilton and District

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Community Development and Qualitative Community Research: Personal Reflections on a Local Project

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by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to describe the activities carried out in a community-based research project in which community development was a priority. In the literature, this type of research is often labelled "participatory research". This paper is essentially a critique of a community research project carried out on the accessibility of the social service system to the diverse racial and cultural population in Hamilton-Wentworth. It involved an eleven member group of citizens from the diverse racial and cultural community in steering the project; they also insisted on a community development approach to the project. This paper questions the usefulness of the "scientific method" and considers instead, a multifaceted, qualitative approach which incorporates some community development principles. It is shown that the use of the traditional, quantitative method which often obscures or omits idiographic interpretation of data (i.e., the specifics or particulars of the individuals involved in the study) that is crucial for rounding out our understanding, is not useful for this type of project.

The paper is divided into four main sections based on the stages of a research project: form a steering group and develop a project outline; collect the data; analyse the collected data, write a draft report and circulate it to the community for comments, and; finalize the report and implement the recommendations. The common theme between and within these stages focuses on the need to involve the target community in taking ownership of the research process. The final section contains some personal reflections on the important challenges with which researchers are faced when carrying out community-based research.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on a community-based research project which took place in 1989 and 1990. The research project cited is based on a report of the accessibility of the social service system to diverse racial and cultural groups (DeSantis, 1990). I was involved with this project and it is my experiences which shape this paper's content.

In general, this study sought to document the barriers that diverse racial and cultural groups experience in trying to have their social service needs met. It took place over an 18 month period in Hamilton, Ontario. It included a multifaceted, qualitative research methodology involving a group of people from diverse racial and cultural communities who guided the development and implementation of the research project; they were the Steering Group. Appendix 1 contains some definitions of terms used throughout this paper.

When this group first came together, they talked about their needs for community development and not just coming together to meet the needs of funders. They believed there were no reasons why they could not build some community development activities into this community research project. The group believed that networking, information sharing and problem solving with other community people, and raising other issues of concern and resolving them were important community development activities that could be carried out during the course of the research project.

The project began with a brief telephone survey of agencies regarding the policies and mechanisms already in place to facilitate diverse racial and cultural groups access to their services. Mailed surveys to ethno-cultural and mainstream agencies were developed as a way to gather information that would form the foundation for the workshops. Workshops with agencies and citizens were held in order for these people to discuss and further articulate the barriers to accessing services, the necessary goals for a better service system, and a list of priorities. A draft report was released to the community for comment to ensure none of the survey results or workshop proceedings had been misinterpreted. Follow-up workshops were held 3 months later to receive feedback. All workshops were held separately for citizens and agencies because it was thought citizens may be freer to

express their concerns about the service system if representatives of the system itself were not present; indeed, the results of many workshops for non-service providers revealed much criticism of the system. All of these activities were developed and implemented by the Steering Group.

This project was never intended to be a definitive statement of the barriers to social services and what to do about them because the project was the first of its kind in Hamilton. It was considered to be an exploratory project which would lay a foundation for further community research and community development.

The final point to be made at the beginning of this paper is I am not suggesting this is the only method to carry out community research. There is a role for both qualitative and quantitative research depending on the context and the key unanswered questions.

This paper begins with a description of the main values and assumptions that shaped this community research project; that section (section 2.0) is titled, "Objective" Community Research? The third section describes key principles of qualitative research and community development as we used them in this project. The use of four key steps in carrying-out a community-based research project provide the framework for the remaining sections of this paper. These steps include forming a steering group and developing a project outline (section 4.0), collecting the data (section 5.0), analysing the collected data and writing a draft report (section 6.0), and finalizing the report and implementing the recommendations (section 7.0). The eighth and final section focuses on the variety of forces and political challenges to completing community research projects in which community development is a priority.

2.0 "OBJECTIVE" COMMUNITY RESEARCH?

The group of us who came together to carry out this project acknowledged at the outset there cannot be "objective" community research. All research with people result in reciprocal effects and interactions as well as subjective responses between researcher and community members. This is substantiated quite well through Lincoln and Guba's text, Naturalistic Inquiry (1985). In general, Lincoln and Guba describe how the person/group that asked for the research to be done, the

selection of research questions, the stated purpose of a research project, the methodology selected, the interpretation of findings, and the development of recommendations are all value laden activities.

This is not to imply that community research is not useful or relevant. It is more a question of how we then go about carrying out community research and who we involve that really adds validity to the results.

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) key characteristics of research require some elaboration here. Five main beliefs underlie their critique of traditional, "objective" community research: 1) realities are constructed, multiple, and holistic rather than single, tangible, and fragmentable; 2) researcher and researchee are interactive and inseparable rather than independent; 3) time- and context-bound hypothesis are possible rather than time-and context-free generalizations; 4) all things are in states of mutual and simultaneous shaping rather than linear cause and effect relationships; and 5) research is value-bound rather than value free. Table 1, on the following page, summarizes the contents of Lincoln and Guba's book. These points will be elaborated upon in sections four to seven as they were the basis for the Steering Group to embark on its community work.

Given Table 1, it becomes obvious why diverse racial and cultural communities became important players in the definition of the research focus and the selection of processes and structures for the research project. In fact, ultimately, the community should feel they <u>own</u> the research project in order to maximize community participation, the quality of data collected and recommendations made, and people's motivation to push for implementation of the recommendations.

Table 1: Key Components of the Naturalistic Inquiry Method
(after Lincoln and Guba, 1985)

1) Consider the natural setting of the target population.

2) Know humans are the measuring instruments in this process; what is being asked and by whom are important considerations.

3) Understand observed and intuitive knowledge are important aspects of the collected data in addition to knowledge expressible in language form.

4) Use qualitative methods.

5) Use purposive sampling methods.

6) Understand the focus will be on inductive analysis from the collected data not deductive analysis from theory.

7) Know the development of subsequent theory based on the project should be grounded in multiple realities of the collected data.

8) Understand the design of the project will emerge as data become available.

9) Consider the need to build time into the project to "negotiate outcomes" with project participants; that is, realize the importance of feeding back information into the community to ensure appropriate interpretation.

10) Case study reporting mode is appropriate because it is more adaptable to a description of multiple realities than a "scientific report" focusing on generalizations.

11) Understand particulars are important rather than lawlike generalizations (i.e., idiographic interpretation should be a goal).

12) Consider tentative application of findings because realities are multiple and different for different people.

13) Consider focus-determined boundaries; that is, let the realities define the focus rather than the researchers' preconceptions.

14) Understand there are special criteria for trustworthiness; internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity are no longer as relevant.

3.0 COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND QUALITATIVE COMMUNITY RESEARCH

Before moving into a description of the project, it is necessary to describe the key elements of community development and qualitative community research which shaped this community process.

Community development is a term with many definitions. Instead of providing a definition here, it is useful to consider five key characteristics of community development which operate at the personal and societal levels. These five characteristics resulted from the work of the Community Development Discussion Group of the Social Planning and Research Council and help us to understand whether community development is actually taking place (1992). These five characteristics are:

a) citizen participation (e.g., are people defining their own issues?);
b) organization development (e.g., are better community organizations being created?);
c) sense of community (e.g., do people have a sense of community connectedness?);
d) concrete benefits (e.g., is there evidence of new, or improved, policies?);
e) social learning (e.g., are people learning what "systems" are and how to work them?).

The key elements of community development brought to this project included: community people are most knowledgeable and able to define their own issues/problems; involve the people who are affected by the research project (and who may be affected by the subsequent recommendations) in the development of the research focus and methodology; involve community people in the drafting of a report; encourage and support people to develop their own initiatives of concern beyond the research project; support people's ongoing efforts to further organize their own community; ensure people have access to useful information and resources in order to make change; and, people can enhance skills and their confidence level when they participate in research on their communities. There are a variety of resource materials available. Resources which are useful for this topic are <u>From the Grass Roots</u> (Social Action Commission of Diocese of Charlottetown, 1987), <u>Helping</u>

Seniors Mobilize (Mairs, 1991), and Pragmatics of Community Organization (Lee, 1986).

The elements of qualitative community research brought to this particular project include open-ended surveys, discussion groups with agency staff and diverse racial and cultural communities, the use of stories/scenarios to illustrate issues of concern, the use of verbatim responses in the research report, and the incorporation of divergent results/recommendations into the report instead of only common themes.

Participatory research is a type of qualitative research in which people who are the focus of an inquiry are also the main actors in the inquiry. For example, in the community research project carried out in Hamilton, a steering group comprising *people* from diverse racial and cultural communities in Hamilton, came together to guide the development and implementation of the entire research project. This group of eleven people developed the research focus, developed the methodology, organized and facilitated workshops, drafted a report and edited the final report based on community feedback.

In Maguire's book (1987), she provides a very thorough discussion for people interested in doing participatory research. She approaches her discussion from a feminist perspective thereby helping us to become more aware of sexism in research - she left me thinking a lot about racism and ageism in community-based research as well. Her basic point is participatory research differs from traditional, quantitative research in that it is based on "social investigation, education and action" (p. 3).

In this community research process, I worked as a facilitator. Essentially, I ensured minutes from steering group meetings were ready for subsequent meetings, ensured all flipchart materials were transcribed on to paper and sent out to steering group members, took steering group's suggested changes and redrafted parts of the report, mailed summaries of the draft out to the community and agencies, brought major issues of concern to the steering group's attention, helped organize workshops and assisted with content analysis. I also found myself being an advocate and an educator at various points throughout the process as well as after the report had been completed and implementation became a primary activity; many funders and agency staff were not aware of the usefulness of this methodology.

Throughout this community process, my major struggle was in continually telling people I was not an "expert", but rather they were the experts on their own life issues. A co-operative effort to undertake a community-based research project became paramount.

One of the most important objectives for carrying out community research in this way (i.e., a naturalistic inquiry kind of approach) is it encourages people to realize research does not require domination by professionals or experts. Research is an activity in which all people can engage. We carry out research whenever we compare prices and products while grocery shopping or buying a car. By involving a group of community people in the research process, it is not long before they realize they do indeed have the skills and experience to play a lead role. The research facilitator in this process should ensure her/his activities continually encourage steering group members to play a lead role. Their experiences within this process then leads to greater confidence for embarking on future activities of this type.

In conclusion, in this particular community research project, community development actually became a theme upon which the research was built. A broad-based attempt to involve people throughout diverse racial and cultural communities from the beginning to the end of the project and beyond became a priority for the steering group.

4.0 STEP ONE - FORM STEERING GROUP & DEVELOP PROJECT OUTLINE

The first step in this community-based research project was the development of a project outline and, a short time later, the formation of a steering group. In order to receive regional government funding, a project outline had to be submitted first. This was submitted with a note indicating once the steering group of citizens had been formed, the outline would be further developed as the group deemed necessary. This was one of the first hurdles encountered in this type of project. Ideally, a steering group should have drafted the first project outline and forwarded it to the funder.

As noted in Lincoln and Guba, a project outline should be a flexible plan. An overview of the purpose, the questions the project is expected to answer, the assumptions and values people bring to the process, a flexible methodology, an idea of what will be done with the data, and an indication of who will be doing what were all important pieces of that project outline. **How this initial stage is carried-out shapes the entire research process - especially the type of data collected and how they may be interpreted.**

It would have been very difficult to carry out this project if the funder had objected to the methodology in which a community-based steering committee was to be the main guide for the process. Credibility of the research project could have been seriously undermined if people from within diverse racial and cultural communities had not helped shape the process.

A citizen steering group helped make this project relevant to the communities of focus. Guaranteeing the opportunity to take control of the project to this group of people aided in building credibility into the process and assisted in securing higher quality results; this is reflected in findings which are sensitive to the communities and, consequently, recommendations which are responsive to <u>real</u> problems. At the beginning of the project, many of these steering group members had to be convinced they have the ability to undertake certain activities and, indeed, possess the knowledge to do so.

This steering group comprised eleven members from a variety of racial and cultural communities in Hamilton. All of the eleven members had been involved in other community activities and only one was a social service provider. The members were told at the beginning they were recruited for the steering group because they were citizens, not because of their affiliation with any agency in the community. Thus, members were encouraged to wear their "citizen" hats throughout the research process.

At their first meeting, the group spent much time discussing key concepts and issues of concern to them. Some of those issues included ghettoization, integration versus assimilation, and racism. The members assumptions and values were included in these discussions even though a formal meeting agenda had not pointed to the

need to discuss them. Discussions about assumptions and values shaped the project's purpose and main research questions.

For example, steering group members talked about the barriers in the social services system they believed existed for diverse racial and cultural groups. Racism, inability to speak languages other than English, and lack of cultural understanding on the part of service providers were barriers discussed by group members based on their experiences. Thus, barriers to services became an important focus for the mailed survey to agencies and small group discussions with citizens. As well, one of the main values shared by the group members included the need for people to come together to discuss problems with the social service system. Consequently, the project evolved to include public workshops for people to voice and discuss their concerns about the social services with which they had experience.

During the initial meetings organized to develop the outline of the community research project, every component of the project was discussed - even though it meant some decisions could not be made because further information was required from the community. The group talked about carrying out a variety of activities which were similar to Lincoln and Guba's key components (i.e., they did not receive a copy of Table 1). For example, the steering group members were "measuring instruments" for the workshops that were to be organized; they facilitated the workshops and recorded data shared by participants. The steering group also decided upon a multifaceted qualitative approach to collecting the data. They decided mailed surveys should be sent to social service providers to get an understanding of the barriers they perceived exist in the social service system and, hence, the goals the system should develop to eliminate these barriers. They also believed workshops should be organized for "citizens" of diverse racial and cultural communities to allow them the opportunity to discuss, in small groups, their concerns about the social service system. They also suggested each workshop be run twice so people who could not attend one could attend the other. The steering group talked about the need to let the research activities unfold and then decide if more workshops were required than originally planned. This is Lincoln and Guba's point about emergent design. As well, the steering group believed all information collected through the surveys and workshops should be fed back to the community in order to check the writer's interpretation and allow them the opportunity to add other comments or ask questions not raised at the meetings or through the surveys. The steering group

talked about the need to record the stories people shared during the small group discussions. The group believed these stories made obvious the issues they were trying to explain.

In summary then, this first step of the community research process focused on pulling together a group of people from the community who were intimately connected with the topic of research, and approached the topic from an "ordinary citizen" perspective, thereby making the whole research process **relevant.** Allowing a group like this to take ownership of such a process also helped restore credibility in the process and encouraged further participation in trying to make the service system more responsive to real needs.

Despite the ideal process we had envisioned, we had some struggles. The two below are illustrative.

- We did not strategize enough around ensuring the large and very diverse racial and cultural communities were well informed of the research process. We did not talk about special advertising requirements necessary to reach them. For example, we did not have enough money to translate flyers in a variety of languages and we did not discuss in detail different places in the community where we could advertise specifically to catch their attention.

- The steering group comprised very busy people integrally connected to their communities. Most of them thought they could only make a commitment for an eight month period. Our struggle was Lincoln and Guba's criterion of emergent design encouraged more flexibility than that to which the volunteer committee members could commit. Consequently, a few workshops were held beyond the committee's deadline and only a few committee members could help organize them.

5.0 STEP TWO - COLLECT THE DATA

The steering group members participated in the development of the surveys as well as structuring small group discussions. We talked about similar studies which had been carried out in other communities and how we could build their processes into our project so as not to re-invent the wheel.

Steering group members influenced the content of the surveys and small group discussions through questions about literacy level, translated information and negative cultural assumptions. The group talked about some key topics that could be used as ideas for discussion for the workshops in order to help participants get started; these topics were developed into paragraph-long scenarios/stories and circulated at the workshops. These scenarios/stories were not used if a particular small group at the workshop began the discussion with little assistance. Once other groups began their discussion with one of the scenarios, it was not essential they work through every one of them, rather, topics of concern to them were discussed. Some of the topics covered in the scenarios included family violence, English-as-a-Second-Language classes and finding health care. It is noteworthy women in the steering group wanted to ensure certain issues were covered. For example, they asked how they would ensure double discrimination (i.e., discrimination based on being a visible minority and being a woman) was viewed as a legitimate concept for discussion and then reached the final report?

These steering group members also participated as small group facilitators and recorders of the group discussions. I believe they brought a particular perspective to this component of the research; they asked a different set of probing questions than might experts or professionals. These people also appeared less concerned by the search for lawful generalizations (i.e., only considering as legitimate, themes which were common to every one in the discussion group) and tended to record all people's comments. People's stories became important illustrations of major problems that undoubtedly did not only affect one person in the community. These people seemed to believe a range of data were important, not just the issues and experiences discussed and agreed upon by the group.

A young East Asian woman recounted a story about a friend of hers who came to Canada as a nanny. She was sexually harassed by her male employer but did not know sexual harassment was illegal in Canada. She felt powerless to change her situation. This story was one of many told which pointed to the lack of information available about people's rights in Canada.

I believe people in the small groups probably felt their concerns were being heard, understood and recorded in a plan for change because people from diverse

racial and cultural communities were helping lead the group and record this information. How open would a woman have felt recounting the story about sexual harassment if white men were leading the group and taking notes?

Nonetheless, during this data collection phase there were some difficulties. The points below illustrate some of those difficulties.

- There was a realization the Terms of Reference for the study should have specifically included the objective to bring together people to network and begin to understand they can have an impact on community concerns as a collective and be quite effective. The Terms of Reference only contained the typical research objectives.

- The workshops contained both men and women. Some of the participants seemed to be inhibited when it came to certain topics. For example, the men from some cultures seemed resistant to talking about family violence in their groups. I was also not sure how some of the women felt, but I was left with an unanswered question: "Did we collect as much data as we could have, had we separated the sexes into two separate groups?"

- Following from the above, I wondered if we should have separated ethnic groups too.

6.0 STEP THREE - ANALYSE COLLECTED DATA, WRITE DRAFT REPORT & CIRCULATE

This section focuses on analysing the collected data, writing a draft report and recommendations, and releasing the report to the community, or communities, for verification of content. An important feedback loop intended to check writers' interpretations will be explained here.

The process of analysing the collected data is contingent upon the method of data collection. In this project, surveys containing both open- and closed-ended questions were sent to service providers. These were analysed through frequency counts and content analysis of the open-ended questions; I pulled all these survey responses together by creating a master data list which was then circulated and discussed by the steering group. In general, the data collected through small group

discussions required a combination of content analysis and case reporting. In the study critiqued here, the categories of data included everything from the philosophical (e.g., ghettoization) to the very concrete service issues (e.g., the need to change the way Employment and Immigration Canada screens people for jobs).

The steering group was involved in analysing the raw data from all sources of data collection. They participated in the identification of special subgroups in the diverse communities which emerged from the myriad of workshop proceedings. As noted at the beginning of this paper, the identification of certain groups and issues in the research process is highly dependent on one's values and perspectives. Indeed, the steering group found there were special service issues for women, seniors and refugees.

An important step was scrutinizing the results of the variety of data collection methods and the different subgroups within the target population for both common and divergent themes. For example, the survey of service providers and the citizen workshops both indicated a common concern around the lack of different language capacities in agency staff. The agency staff acknowledged not being able to serve certain clients and the citizens expressed their frustration at trying to make their needs known in a language in which they were not comfortable. Since both groups indicated concern around this issue, it is important to note it that way in the report. A divergent theme surfaced when the citizens talked a lot about agencies' biased procedures - the agencies never talked about this issue.

The written report became the interpretation of the steering group of which the research facilitator was a part so the participants in the process had to be given the opportunity to verify its content. This was an important component of the research process which required extra time and energy on the part of the steering group, but the quality of the data also increased. There was also greater opportunity for a consensus to develop in the community about what should be done to change a situation. The larger the group of committed people the greater the political clout to attempt change. This is analogous to Maguire's (1987) education phase which sets the stage for action.

The steering group released the draft report to the public for review for three months. The public was defined as all the people who participated in earlier

workshops, the agencies that participated in the surveys and workshops, as well as those agencies, churches and other organizations that had not yet participated. It demonstrated commitment to the communities to incorporate their input. Three months after the draft report had been released, a number of workshops were organized. These workshops were organized separately for citizens and service providers. Participants sought clarification on a number of issues, suggested rewording some of the recommendations, and then spent the bulk of the workshop time talking about how to get the recommendations implemented in the community.

The steering group believed the stories people told were very powerful in explaining major issues so the group wanted these stories incorporated into the report. In fact, verbatim responses from citizens were included in the report. In this case, some of the workshops with diverse racial and cultural communities resulted in the development of recommendations which went straight from the workshops into the report, verbatim; the steering group provided notes of clarification where they thought it was necessary and labelled that section, "citizen recommendations".

Despite the activities carried out above, there were some limitations to the process. The following list highlights some of those.

- The agency I work for has severe budget limitations as we are a non-profit organization. Thus, the translation of material into other languages could not be undertaken. Because of this, some people who did not speak or read English were excluded from the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft report.

- While analysing the data, we did not divide the data into categories based on male-female or ethnic group. Thus, I think the results conjured up the wrong image of diverse racial and cultural communities being a monolithic entity.

- We were aware of the need to separate service providers and citizens because most often their concerns focused on each other. In writing the draft report, there was a struggle in developing common recommendations because of the very different perspectives of citizens and service providers. The following section details how this was handled.

7.0 STEP FOUR - FINALIZE THE REPORT AND IMPLEMENT THE RECOMMENDATIONS

The last phase of a research project usually includes the finalization of recommendations and a written report. Ideally, it should include an implementation strategy which will point the way for continuing community involvement and ownership. I expect the results of community-based research to challenge the *status-quo*, otherwise why is it being done if all is assumed to be well in a particular service system? The final product should help the community, the government and funders understand what service or systems are not operating properly.

Workshops were held with service providers and citizens to finalize the recommendations and the report. The steering group was very active in carrying out an editing function. In fact, this group was the major force behind ensuring the list of recommendations developed at the citizen workshops was included in the report as distinct findings separate from the collection of service provider data.

The main list of recommendations was a synthesis of the results of the multifaceted approach used to gather the data. That is, survey and small group discussion data from the service provider sector were synthesized with data collected from the citizen workshops and themes noted in the literature. Nonetheless, the steering group noted the importance of indicating separately the recommendations citizens developed in the workshops. This acknowledged the importance of what ordinary citizens have to say and should not be "watered down" by service providers or "experts" when a report is being written. I recall that workshop participants appeared to become excited when a steering group member explained if community people wanted their own recommendations included in the report they would be included.

Some of the community development results began to emerge at this point in the process. First, much networking within ethnic groups had already started as well as between ethnic groups and service providers. For some people, there seemed to be the sense they could help each other. A second result was some mainstream agencies began to initiate multicultural change processes within their systems; they heard and internalized the need for change highlighted by members of diverse racial and cultural communities.

After the report had been finalized by the community of service providers and citizens, it was presented to the funders in the community (e.g., United Way and Regional Government). At the presentation to the Regional Government's Health and Social Services Committee, no commitment was made to alter the *status-quo* based on the report's findings. This lack of action inspired the development of a small group of service providers and citizens who decided to make the implementation of the report their mission. Politically, this was wise as it put pressure on the people who have the power to make funding decisions and hence affect the design of services for diverse racial and cultural communities. This community-based implementation group had the ability to make the report real by virtue of their firsthand experience with the issues raised in the report and it had the networking capabilities to impact on the larger decision-making process of the service funding process.

The implementation group sent the relevant recommendations and supporting documentation to the agencies and departments targeted by the report. The struggle to implement recommendations required people to take a hard look at some of the policies and services already in place in order to understand how the report's recommendations could be used to alter their current ineffectiveness. The following example illustrates this point. English-as-a-Second-Language classes are not made universally available simply by making them free of charge. Women are excluded from this process because child care is not provided; this is fairly obvious if one stops to consider the difference between men's and women's lives.

Once again the process for this part of the project was not without its difficulties. Two main issues plagued the finalization and implementation of recommendations.

- There was an inability to completely answer all the questions which the steering group set out to answer.

- A community-based implementation team of service providers and citizens could have resulted in some service providers using a set of recommendations to build "their empire". There are some powerful service providers who may distort the findings and lobby for change based on their own agendas. In this

project, citizens were important activists who tried to ensure this did not happen.

- One of the major concerns regarding implementation of recommendations is how, over a long period, to maintain the momentum and energy with which the group had originally come together. Implementation of recommendations directed at large bureaucracies like Employment and Immigration Canada take a long time to realize. Over the course of a year, this implementation group started losing its energy.

In conclusion then, the public release of a research report like this one illuminated the limitations of the present system of services and pointed to the changes needed to make the system more responsive and relevant to target communities. A community-based implementation group comprising both service providers and citizens, rather than just one agency like the Social Planning and Research Council, helped push for the implementation of recommendations already developed by the community.

8.0 Political Forces and Challenges to Completing Community Research in which Community Development is a Priority

I think this paper is testimony of how so called, objective, scientific methods can be seriously challenged. The paper also shows that when community development is a key theme in a project, the "objective scientific" method should indeed be challenged. This paper shows how questioning our frame of reference and articulating, instead, our set of values and perspectives can lead to higher quality results and a more credible process for the communities involved. When people are given the opportunity to participate in a process without the constraints of boundaries pre-determined by experts , the results will look very different and be much more meaningful to communities.

One of the key challenges to carrying out this type of research project revolves around many people's sense of the validity of this method. This is reflected in the use of the following descriptions: unscientific; produces inaccurate findings; and lacks objectivity. There are a variety of other political forces and challenges both outside and within communities that require some explanation here.

8.1 Forces from Outside Communities which have an Influence

The first major challenge of community-based research projects like this one is linked to the question, who asked for the study to be completed and therefore probably already outlined the agenda? The Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton and District has continually been faced with pressure from a variety of levels of government funders to answer government research questions.

After a number of years of struggling with this pressure and the counter-pressure felt from "target communities", the Social Planning and Research Council has began to include in all proposals to funders, the involvement of community-based steering groups to further define the focus and methodology of projects; this requires additional time between the beginning and end dates of projects to properly involve communities. Funders need to know the community should be revising (and hopefully some day, "developing") project outlines so they become active participants in a process and not simply "subjects" of an inquiry. For those of us who are community researchers and social planners, we must learn to distinguish between a funder problem (e.g., "tell me where to spend my money") and a planning problem (e.g., "how do we plan in order to serve the diversity of community needs?"). Communities are best able to shed light on their own needs, desires, and suggestions for change.

A second major force with which the Social Planning and Research Council has had to contend is how the Council is viewed by communities. In the project cited regarding diverse racial and cultural communities, some very important questions were asked. What right did we have as a mainstream agency to be facilitating an inquiry into diverse racial and cultural groups access to social services? Do we simply reflect, reinforce, and support the typical power base regarding services in Hamilton? How do we ever go beyond the typical response to meeting people's needs when we are stuck in the mainstream? Answers to these questions are complex but a community-based steering group is one of the best mechanisms for the Social Planning and Research Council to deal with these questions. The steering group should be encouraged to take as much control and ownership of such a project in order to deal with these types of problems.

A third major force external to communities in research projects of this type is the role service providers play. In this particular project, some of the service providers were not at all familiar with working with "clients" in a research and planning capacity. "We know exactly what clients need" was a very common response when service providers were surveyed and involved in workshop discussions. In the past, service providers have had much power over clients. Many service providers must learn that in order to develop responsive and sensitive services, the people who use them must be involved in planning them.

A related problem with service providers' role in this community research and planning process was the competition among agencies for scarce funding. When the final report for this particular project was being finalized, some service providers attempted to add details to recommendations which would support the need, or expansion, for their services. The steering group seemed to realize when this was happening and not allow it. The struggle to build empires was very real in this context.

8.2 Forces Within Communities which have an Influence

The most important internal force within a community which has a major impact on projects of this type is the friction which may exist or develop between groups - and there is nothing wrong with friction between groups as this is often a reflection of heterogeneity. Communities may be divided according to a variety of characteristics. Some of these characteristics include age, sex, religion, ethnicity and income level. It is for this reason when a steering group is being formed and community processes are being implemented that consideration be given to the structure of those communities.

For example, it is important to spend a number of meetings at the outset of a project getting to know each other and sketching out the community and its many characteristics. Time spent during this first phase will really help reduce the number of possible community conflicts which may arise. It will not totally eliminate **all** the community conflicts - some conflicts are inevitable and they are best managed at the community level. Many issues and power relationships will have to be dealt with as a matter of course in this type of research.

As well, inviting people to participate in a process as a "representative" of a particular group can be very difficult because often there is no process within that community to decide on a "representative". Choosing a representative from a community is also problematic because it implies homogeneity within a group. This should not be taken as a given. Women's movements (note, movement is plural) showed us quite clearly women are not a homogeneous group. The notion of a variety of "publics" is very important for this type of community work. It is best to simply invite people to join a steering group or participate in focus groups based on their experiences. (One must be cautious though about only inviting friends and acquaintances to join a steering group.)

A similar area of concern deals with questions about the involvement of the "silent majority". These people should be sought out as they too bring a particular perspective to service planning. In the Hamilton project, we did not have the time or resources to search for these people and I believe this was a major limitation to the research and community development work. Perhaps the involvement of the larger community could evolve as implementation of research recommendations begins. This larger community involvement over time may also contribute to a validity check of the research findings.

8.3 Some Personal Post-Project Discomfort Still Lingers

Even though we developed a community-based research project with a major community development thrust, I still reflect, a bit later, on more complicated and hard to change aspects of initiatives like this one. I have outlined some of my lingering discomfort below.

First, what are data? In the past, data were most often the "yes/no" responses from surveys. Then open-ended, more qualitative, questions became part of surveys in which the answers were "content analysed". Focus group discussions are now quite common; discussions are summarized for reports with verbatim phrases made by participants included in the final report. When children are involved in community-based research, their pictures become important data. Cognitive maps are important data to urban geographers in their research. Within the social service system, many service providers, social service researchers and funders need to learn that data are not solely numbers.

Second, what should my new job description be, given the job of researcher has changed so much within the last few years? It is evident from this paper my role now encompasses organizing, education and advocacy. I am no longer the type of researcher that sits in front of a computer inputting data and running multiple regression. How can I make my new job description and attached activities acceptable to huge bureaucracies with whom the Social Planning and Research Council contracts, given community development principles focus on fundamental questions of who has power and who does not want to give it up? Is partnership between the Social Planning and Research Council and the community really workable given this context?

My third point, is a corollary to the second point. How can we ever truly attain community ownership and control of processes when funders often dictate the research agenda? The issue of domination by the powerful is a very real issue here. Perhaps we all should be working toward helping funders and other "powerful" people see that in a truly democratic society, communities should define and control research on themselves.

Fourth, social change is a very labour-intensive activity. The implementation of recommendations based on a community research project requires people to make a commitment to a long process and a lot of time. I often heard throughout the course of this project, "why should I participate in this endeavor when nothing ever changes anyway?" People burn out after years of trying to make the "system" more responsive to needs they have defined. The shift from investigation to social change requires a concerted effort and long term commitment.

Finally, how we actually select, or recruit, people to participate in a community process as a committee member is flawed. We, the Social Planning and Research Council, <u>select</u> people as opposed to people from the community <u>choosing</u> someone to participate on the committee. This is complicated because we know "the community" is not a homogeneous entity. In fact, now more than ever, we hear people referring to "diverse communities", "several publics" and "many groups". How can we develop a strategy for community-based research projects wherein people <u>choose</u> who will become committee members and then affect the shape of the entire process?

9.0 FINALE

In closing, this community research project on diverse racial and cultural groups access to the social service system could have looked very different if community development had not been seen as a priority. The research project could have simply been a series of random, mail-out surveys to service providers. This would have resulted in a different set of findings and recommendations. Service providers' perceptions of people's needs and barriers to services - as but two examples - are only a tiny component toward understanding complex communities.

Community development principles help to ground community research in reality - or rather, should I say, the multiple realities of people's lives. Bringing community people together to discuss their concerns about social services as well as larger societal problems with which they are faced as visible minorities, the opportunity to problem-solve together, and the sense these people have control over a process which impacts on social services and other people's attitudes, are only a few of the many benefits for communities. Community research which incorporates community development principles as the guiding framework, supports healthy human growth and hence, results in healthier communities.

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APPENDIX 1 - DEFINITIONS

In this paper, community-based research focuses on people in neighbourhoods or certain areas of cities. They could live on the streets, abandoned buildings, apartments, or houses. They do not live in institutions such as hospitals.

The scientific method can be defined in a number of different ways. It typically includes rigid sampling procedures in an attempt to secure a "representative" sample while rigorous statistical testing is applied to the collected data result in drawing associations between variables.

Qualitative approaches on the other hand do not necessarily include representative samples. Instead these approaches rely heavily on participant observation, indepth interviewing with open-ended questions, and the opportunity to include idiographic interpretation of the data as opposed to a focus only on law-like generalizations.

Idiographic interpretation of data and drawing of conclusions focuses on the particulars of the case on hand because "different interpretations are likely to be meaningful for different realities and because interpretations depend on ... investigator-respondent interactions, contextual factors ..." (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:42). Lawlike generalizations are not useful if one's goal is deep experience and understanding of a situation.

Multifaceted refers to the need to adopt more than one strategy or approach to collecting data. For example, a mail survey should be supplemented with public meetings and small group discussions to collect a variety of different perspectives and more indepth explanation of issues. A feedback loop may also be built into the process whereby information gleaned from a variety of processes can be fed back into the community for verification.